

Reading

Read the first half of Max Black's
“The Identity of Indiscernibles”

Two different questions about ontology

- Do there exist entities of a given sort (universals, numbers, etc.)?
- What sort of claims in a theory commit the theorist to the existence of entities of a certain sort?
 - This is the issue of ontological commitment

Problem of negative existentials

- “Pegasus does not exist” seems to be true.
- Yet if the word ‘Pegasus’ is meaningful, then it seems Pegasus must exist after all.
- Similarly, “universals do not exist,” etc.
- Seems the very use of the words ‘universals’, ‘Pegasus’, etc. is ontologically commissive.

McX's response

- Pegasus does exist, it's an idea in people's minds.
- This is a bad idea: It is always wrong to confuse an idea with what it is or purports to be an idea of.
- Of course the idea of Pegasus does exist. This is not what we want to deny.

Wyman's response

- Pegasus does subsist, as an unactualized possible entity.
- Pegasus does not exist in the sense that it is not actual.
- Quine thinks that “unactualized possibles” are mysterious and ill-defined.

- Q holds that possibility should be reserved for statements, not entities.
- Wyman's solution won't work for other examples.
 - “The round square cupola on Berkeley College does not exist.”
 - This is meaningful but it is not even possible that there exists such a thing.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

- The mistake leading to the problem is thinking the meaning of every noun phrase is an entity of some sort.
- E.g., the meaning of “the 42nd President of the US” is the man, Bill Clinton.
- Russell argued against this. The meaning of a definite description s.b. understood in the context of the whole sentence, thus:

- “The F is G” means,
 - There exists a unique F , and it is G.
 - “The president is married” = There exists a unique x s.t. [x is president and x is married]]
- “The F exists” means,
 - There exists a unique F.
 - There exists a unique x [x is F].
 - Existence is not a genuine predicate.

- “The F does not exist” means,
 - It is not the case that [the F exists.]
 - = It is not the case that [there exists a unique F]

Example:

‘The largest prime does not exist’ =

It is not the case that [there exists an x s.t.
[x is prime and x is larger than every
prime other than x]]

This does not attribute “non-existence” to
the (presumably existent) largest prime

- This commits us at most to the properties (universals) being prime, being larger than, etc.
- Does not commit us to a particular instantiating these properties (that is what we are denying).
- Neither existence nor non-existence are properties on this view.

Extension to names

- “Pegasus” can be treated as a definite description, something like,
 - “the mythical horse of Bellerophon.”
 - Then Russell’s Theory can be applied:
 - “Pegasus does not exist” =
Not [there exists a unique x [x is mythical & x is a horse and x belongs to Bellerophon]].

- Though “Bellerophon” needs to be dealt with---
- Use the artificial general term “pegasizes.”
 - Quine claims all “singular terms” (other than variables) can in this way be eliminated, along with their alleged ontological commitments.